

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTOR OF FEAR: ITS CAUSES AND EFFECTS.

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Fear is an age-old enemy of mankind. Although the actual things fears may vary with the changing conditions of civilisation, the psychological experience that we call FEAR, continues to torment most of us from time to time.

All members of the medical profession have important opportunities to observe its effects among the reactions of their patients, and so may be expected to have some interest and curiosity concerning its causes, some of which we will try to explain in this paper, and by this means to shed some light upon those forms of fear which are not always intelligible to the onlooker.

We may say that the function of the medical profession is largely to fight against fear. Its members are the protectors and the consolers of those who seek their aid because they are afraid. Then and then only do people seek medical advice. As long as they feel confident to deal with any affliction that troubles them, they continue to do so and only call in the doctor or summon a nurse when their fear grows too great for them to deal with their affliction unaided.

If we should go back to study the beginnings of medicine in primitive times we find that fear played an important part then. Disease was beyond the comprehension of our early ancestors. Wounds derived from a human foe or some beast of prey, as well as injuries resulting from accident, were simple to understand and were usually treated by simple home remedies, but when these did not suffice or the patient was assailed by some malady of unknown origin, fear had the same result as to-day, the doctor—the medicine-man—was called in, to explain the cause of the trouble and not only to devise some remedy but also to carry it out.

It is true that he would ascribe the cause to the operation of some evil spirit or an angry god, or perhaps to the influence of magic caused by the malevolence of a hostile neighbour, but he set to work nevertheless to cure like by like, and worked a greater magic to counteract the spell. Naturally much of this treatment was suggestion of a very powerful kind, arising from the fact that both doctor and patient believed implicitly in the efficacy of the cure and the omnipotence of the doctor. But many other forms of treatment were resorted to as well about which we may read in the various books that have been written upon the early history of medicine.

Still our chief interest here is to examine the part played by fear in the illness of the patient, especially that which comes under the observation of the nurse. Usually the arrival of a nurse upon the scene is a relief to the patient's fear. Here is the protector and a woman who knows what is the matter and what to do. To many of us the unknown in general, and the unknown elements of illness in particular, are some of those which leave us feeling helpless and thus the victims of intense fear. Once again the patient becomes the little child to whom the mother has run to the rescue.

In order to elucidate many psychological phenomena that leave us baffled, we must go back to early childhood

and look there for their prototypes. The little child knows no more terrible experience than to be alone and helpless, especially if it is in pain or has hurt itself. The arrival of mother who sees at once what is wrong, speaks consolingly and does something to ease the hurt acts almost like magic.

It is the nurse's work to-day to carry out this same function, but perhaps more scientifically than mother did in the past, to do something to take away the patient's fear in the first place, by re-assurance, explanation and sympathy, a patient listening to the fear. But as the grown-ups are apt to laugh at a child's fears, so are those to whom illness has become a daily experience sometimes inclined to belittle the fear of their patients and to treat them as of no consequence, because they do not pay enough attention to the causes of these fears.

We cannot go fully into the details of the many interesting fears that can be found in our patients who are suffering from what are regarded as purely physical illnesses, still less can we give any description of those which play such an exceedingly important part in the symptoms of psychological disorders, that frequently come to light among the patients in the care of a nurse with a general training. It is only possible to describe briefly some of the most common that are to be seen in her patients, and to hint at some of those which at times worry the nurse herself, and to sketch an outline of their causes.

The fear of death is one of the most general that is never far from the thoughts of sick persons. It is the epitome of what has been mentioned before, being alone, helpless and unprotected in the face of an unknown danger, the baby alone and forsaken by its mother, knowing not where to seek protection or defence. But this fear of death is usually complicated by the factor of guilt. We have said that the ancient peoples attributed illness to the malice of evil spirits or to the anger of an outraged deity. How often does this same idea obtain to-day, as an undercurrent in the minds of patients and their relatives may be surmised from the frequency with which one hears a remark of this kind: "What can I have done to deserve this?" "Why should I be punished by so much suffering?" or again, "What has that innocent child done to be made to suffer like this?"

Primitive beliefs are reinforced by threats in the childhood of the individual. It is no uncommon occurrence for children to be threatened with the doctor or illness if they continue to do those things that adults consider they should not. "You will make yourself ill if you do so-and-so. I will send for the doctor." Illness thus becomes regarded as the punishment of wrong doing, and the doctor the avenger of the misdemeanour.

The illness may cause fear and be caused by the fears of childhood, but it can also at times provide a defence against some greater fear of the present day which is intolerable. Some situation exists that the person cannot face or go on enduring. Vitality and resistance are lowered and illness develops that otherwise would have been met and dealt with by the automatic healing powers within the individual. We may see the operation of the same influence in retarded convalescence, or a

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